EXTRAVAGANT FORGIVENESS
Matthew 18:21-35
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What is it about us that makes it so difficult for us to forgive? Why in the world are we willing to invest so much of ourselves in anger, hostility and resentment? Frederick Buechner, in a delightful little volume, Wishful Thinking, observes - only partially with tongue in cheek, that of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. And then he describes a dynamic all too familiar to most of us..."To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations yet to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself." (p.2).

Have you ever savored your anger, allowing resentment toward another person to feed on itself until it grew larger and larger, and grew a life of its own totally unrelated to its initial reason? Or have you ever set limits for your children: "Do that one more time and you're going to get it."...and then waited, with more than a little eagerness, for the limit to be crossed again.

It was the late C.S.Lewis, I believe, who observed that, contrary to appearances, the most unpopular Christian virtue is not chastity, but forgiveness. He had in mind the overheated patriotism of wartime when he wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive...And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger." (Mere Christianity, p.89).

There is a sense in which we do love our anger, or at least the right to be angry. There is a sense in which we rather like the idea of forgiveness too but only in its most abstract sense. As a life style; as a practical mode of relationship, we are inclined to reject it out of hand as naive, unrealistic, perhaps even dangerous. All of which is to say that our text this morning contains one of the more radical and important teachings in the New Testament.

Dear Peter! How hard he tried! How like us he sounds! He recalled that Jesus had said something about "forgive us as we forgive others." At the moment Jesus was talking about how to respond when another person wrongs you. Peter thought the situation was right to demonstrate his new, Christ-like, charity. "If my brother sins against me, Lord, shall I forgive him seven times?" It was a generous, almost exaggerated gesture, actually. The rabbis taught that the obligation to forgive another person extended through three incidents. Peter was proposing, with the inspiration of Jesus, to expand it immensely. But instead of congratulating Peter for his sensitivity and growth as a person, Jesus, rather brusquely, brushed his proposal aside and indicated that, once again, Peter had missed the point entirely. "Not seven times...but seventy times seven." That is, by the way, an idiom for "indefinitely". The American Computer mentality concludes that Jesus simply upped the ante. Instead of three or seven the limitations of forgiveness may now be set at 490. That is a misunderstanding. Jesus was saying that there are no limits: that if what we are talking about is forgiveness there can be no limits, restrictions or conditions.

He told a parable: an important parable: a parable that doesn't get the attention accorded to The Prodigal Son nor the Good Samaritan, but which is as important as either of them, theologically and morally.

A servant, said Jesus, owed his King ten thousand talents. A talent was worth a thousand dollars. Read $10,000,000, an overwhelming debt. Don't ask how it happened.

That's an American question. The point is that the man was in a lot of trouble. The king prepared to exercise the only business-like option open to him: sell the servant and his family and hope to recoup at least a little of the loss. The servant, however, pled for mercy. The servant got down on his knees and begged and said, "I'll repay everything." That's supposed to be funny, by the way. Everyone knew the servant couldn't repay. He owed 10,000 talents. His total life's earnings might amount to four talents. The stunning miracle of the parable is that the king did it: he actually forgave the man. It was unlikely, unheard of, radical. Now - the story takes on a kind of burlesque character, The same servant, given his life back. walks out of the palace, bumps into a friend who owes him a hundred denarii - $20, that is; seizes him by the throat and demands repayment. When his debtor asks for a little patience, the man throws the book at him. Others tell the king: in anger he rescinds his decision, and throws the scoundrel into prison. End of story

Forgiveness, it seems, is rather complex. It is not simply a unilateral dynamic between someone who is wronged and the guilty party. It appears, according to Jesus to be bilateral, at least. That is to say, it doesn't work unilaterally. Forgiveness and being forgiving are much the same thing.

Forgiveness, whenever Jesus talks about it, seems almost to precede repentance. We have trouble with that one, but I continue to believe that it is very near to the essence of Christian Faith. Think about it for a minute. Episcopal theologian Reuel Howe teaches that only the absolute assurance of acceptance allows us to be honest about ourselves with others. We aren't about to reveal or acknowledge anything which might result in rejection, ridicule or scorn. Quite to the contrary, we are willing to work rather hard presenting a self, an image, which will receive acceptance, admiration, esteem, even if we have to doctor up the picture a bit.

Coming at it from a slightly different direction, if you do not know that you are forgiven your apology becomes little more than a negotiating, bargaining position. Forgiveness becomes the reward for repeating the proper incantation; namely, "I'm sorry". Jesus taught that forgiveness belongs to the offended, not the offender. Whether it occurs is always the prerogative of the one who has been wronged. In a tantalizing way, He suggested that true repentance - which is a necessary part of restoration - happens after forgiveness, as a result of forgiveness, not before. That is a radical suggestion.

We have trouble with it because it disallows our anger. We don't have the luxury of wallowing in our resentment, waiting in indignation until the offender asks our pardon. We have to sacrifice that good feeling when, out of our kindness, we condesecnd to accept the apology of someone who has offended us. We have trouble because we don't want to believe it works as a practical strategy in human relations - even though revenge, punishment are totally destructive and never work, if the intent is reconciliation.

Mainly, however, we have trouble with this idea because of the complex nature of human guilt. Swiss physician and theologian Paul Tournier identified a dynamic in western people that is helpful. We believe, devoutly, that everything must be paid for. Consequently, we believe that forgiveness is too easy. Instead of accepting forgiveness most of us make ourselves pay over and over again for real or imagined guilt. (See Guilt and Grace, p. 174). We operate on this basis interpersonally, and theologically we look to religion to reinforce the "everything - must - be - paid - for" syndrome. Religion thus becomes the vehicle for paying off the debt which accompanies our guilt. Unfortunately religion has frequently accommodated itself to this inability to be forgiven. Instead of announcing good news, religion often begins with bad news. Instead of proclaiming God's forgiveness the emphasis is on God's anger. Hell becomes the threat; the rites, rituals and rules of religion, the way to avoid it. It is an old and powerful dynamic.

Psychoanalysts in the Freudian school believe that "guilt is awakened in the infant's mind by the fear of losing the love of parents; and also that all the traumas of mental life are connected with the doubt about being loved." Dr Tournier builds on that by observing, "The anxiety of guilt is just this anxiety of being loved no longer. The child has the impression that his parents' love is conditional; that they will love him only on the condition that he is good...In every age men have projected this same idea on God." (Ibid, p.189-190).

But what if we are accepted, loved, forgiven without condition? Then we are free, literally free from the age-old anxiety of guilt. Our God loves us. Guilt is a very negative dynamic. It turns inevitably to aggressiveness, hostility. In theological terms guilt is the reason we cannot be forgiving. But if we are forgiven, all sorts of creative possibilities open between others and ourselves.

If you saw the motion picture Kramer vs. Kramer you will never forget that poignant scene when father and son, eating their first meal without wife and mother, in the midst of almost total rejection and the guilt that inspires, begin to let that guilt express itself in anger at each other. The issue is eating dinner - and waiting for dessert. In a way that is reminiscent of our text the son slowly begins to defy the father: the father lays down the limits: the son keeps crossing the limits: the father keeps expanding them. The anger and resentment mount until the boy defiantly leaves the table and helps himself to ice cream. Near violence and separation follow: total, heartbreaking separation. Later that night the father enters the sleeping boy's room. The little boy has not been sleeping deeply. They embrace. They forgive. New possibilities in their relationship open, not because they have pardoned each other for a single mishap, but because a new attitude, a whole new style, will characterize the relationship; acceptance - forgiveness extended before the infraction happens.

Forgiveness has had a bad press recently. Ever since Eric Segal told us that love means never having to say you're sorry we have been acting as if repentance and forgiveness are repressive, weak and unhealthy. Self-assertion, self-confidence, taking care of my own needs, doing my own thing, have become the vogue in romantic and marital relationships. Trouble is, it doesn't work. I was delighted to read in a Marriage Counseling Journal recently an article which gave space to an idea I thought had been discarded; namely, apology. The author wrote, "Learn to say 'I'm sorry'. Apologies can clear the air and help people begin again. It is the opposite of being defensive and having to be right all the time. If one can say 'I'm sorry', it gives the other space to do the same." (Marriage and Family Living, October 1980, New Hope for Troubled Marriages, Florence Bienenfield).

In parenting, in marriage, in friendship and in everyday relationships the attitude of forgiveness, the active acceptance of others can become a creative and rewarding part of life. In fact, in many ways every day, people ask for the healing of acceptance and forgiveness. Tournier used to emphasize, over and over, that physicians are commonly called on to be priests to their patients; and that healing often was related to the patient's freedom from guilt. So it is with attorneys, teachers, ministers, with anybody, in fact, who is in contact with other people. Each day you and I have the opportunity to convey the healing of God's love to other people - simply by accepting and forgiving them. The opportunities are not necessarily dramatic ones. In fact, we become sidetracked by debating the possibility of forgiving murderers. With his customary wit and insight C.S.Lewis observed that when you wish to learn mathematics you begin with simple arithmetic, not calculus. So, in forgiveness, he advised, begin with your spouse, or a friend, or child, or parent, not the Gestapo.

Forgiveness means that wrongs which we have done will no longer separate us from the person we have wronged. In interpersonal relationships forgiveness happens when the offended extends forgiveness to the offender: parent to child: husband to wife: wife to husband: friend to friend. Forgiveness which is extended allows the offender to be honest, to acknowledge the truth, to repent it. Of course, sometimes it doesn't happen. Sometimes forgiveness extended is abused, exploited, or worse, ignored. But, very simply, there is no other repentance than that prompted by forgiveness, and there is no real forgiveness that depends on repentance, or anything else, for that matter.

It is the good news. It is also the difficult news because we - who need it most, have trouble accepting it. Yet there is no better news, anywhere. We are forgiven - accepted by God, now, before we repent, before we do anything. His love comes first.

Jesus taught that nothing can stop God from loving and forgiving us. He also taught that the goodness of God's forgiveness cannot touch us, until we begin to forgive others. The two cannot be separated: they happen simultaneously, or not at all.

This phenomenon, this new reality, this new state of affairs which exists, in potentially between us, was not, by the way, without cost. This salvation was not easy. Its symbol is a cross.

Amen.

God eternal, we ask grace and strength to forgive as You have forgiven us. Give us faith, our Father, to accept and love ourselves; and to extend to those about us that healing acceptance You extend to us, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.